

DRAFT

The Trouble in River City (It's Not Pool!)

By

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*"Trouble, oh we got trouble,
Right here in River City!"*

When I was a child growing up in the 1950s in Pennsylvania, I spent at least two weeks of every year with relatives in Richmond, Virginia. I remember well that time of segregation. Black and white citizens of Richmond lived among each other, but in alternate universes with separate restrooms, lunch counters and swimming pools. I moved to Richmond in the early 70s. The Civil Rights laws had ended the era of massive resistance to racial integration, and had launched an era of *passive* resistance, including white flight to the suburbs. In the Richmond school system, "the percentage of white students plummeted from 45 to 21 percent between 1960 and 1975" (<http://www.vahistorical.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/passive>, cited on 6/20/2015). In Virginia, cities and counties are politically separate, so that white flight had stymied the goals of integration and had led to a situation where much of the commuter work force took wages out of the city, spending them and paying taxes in the mostly white suburban counties.

The city now had an African-American majority, but it also had seriously reduced revenues. Internal politics in the city became racial politics. Divided city councils split into black and white camps on nearly every issue that came before them. White-majority suburban counties routinely refused to cooperate in regional projects. In some cases, City buses were not even permitted to enter the counties, making commuting nearly impossible for many working families. These were hard days for Richmond. The city struggled to meet basic public services for utilities, roads, affordable housing, and schools. My son attended city schools,

and they were often racial war zones. We Richmonders love to call our town RVA or River City, and we had trouble right here in River City. And it wasn't pool.

My first urban archaeology project had been one I worked on in the early 70s as a student. It was salvage work at the Shockoe Slip Site, a prehistoric village of the 9th century a.d. in the heart of Richmond's emerging night-life district. That experience taught me that urban land use is as likely to bury and seal earlier sites as it is to destroy them. In 1977, armed with grants and contracts, I was able to found the Archeological Research Center at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). The resource potential in Richmond led me to advocate in the city for an urban archaeology program. Nothing fueled my enthusiasm for such a project more than the successes of Pam Cressy and her staff and volunteers at Alexandria Archaeology. That said, I was not surprised to find no such enthusiasm among the folks I approached in the city government. Nothing could have been of less concern to city-council members, whether they were from the land-owning pro-development group or the faction more concerned with paying school teachers and finding places for working folks to live in safety and dignity. Archaeology had insufficient value for folks other than archaeologists and historical-preservation types.

One of my earliest surveys in the city was associated with proposed improvements to the Fifth Street Bridge over the Shockoe Valley in downtown. As a result of that work, I proposed that a suite of adjacent historic urban properties be considered as a multiple resource district eligible for the National Register. That district included the Shockoe Hill Cemetery, the Hebrew Cemetery, the City Poor House, an alms house for the poor African-Americans who were under the city's custody, a "potters field" burial ground for impoverished white citizens and a "Burial Ground for Negroes." The latter two properties were not tested and their archaeological presence was speculation on my part, but the chance they had been buried by filling episodes has subsequently been confirmed by various studies (Stephenson 2008*). The burial ground for freed and enslaved African Americans was in use between ca. 1750 and 1816. It has in recent years been one of several African-American related sites to spark intense, often angry citizen interest in this aspect of

Richmond's buried history, as documented very well by VCU colleague Shawn Utsey in a prize-winning documentary film, *Meet Me in the Bottom: The Struggle to Reclaim Richmond's African Burial Ground*.** The stars of that movie are activist community members who have latched upon the cultural value of this sacred ground and are proposing it be preserved and respected **.

"Black History Matters" is a slogan that has appeared lately on signs carried by citizen protesters encouraging the preservation and interpretation of important archaeological sites that concern historical race relations in the city. Central among these sites has been Lumpkin's Jail, location of a notorious slave pen and the central role played by Richmond in the interstate slave trade during the Antebellum years (Laird**). The Jail site and related slave-trade sites led the National Trust for Historic Preservation to name Shockoe Bottom as one of the top 11 threatened sites in the United States in 2014 *. At the time the Bottom was the site selected by Richmond's mayor for massive redevelopment centered around a proposed new minor-league baseball stadium. To date, public protests and the city's own Slave Trail Commission have managed to put brakes on the stadium. A recent proposal by the Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality to develop the site as a memorial provides hope that black history will matter here (Edwards, this session* and *).

One Saturday morning in 1994, I received a phone call from a vice president of my university telling me that a construction project on our medical campus had hit a snag. Human remains had been located in the excavation and I was asked to go check it out immediately and do whatever was necessary to clear this roadblock and allow construction to continue. What my colleagues and I found was the bottom five or six feet of a large brick-lined well, nearly 30 feet below the level of the adjacent city street. The well fill contained a mass of human bones, hair, cloth, shoes, and obvious medical waste such as suture thread, laboratory glassware, etc. The context was clearly 1840s and 50s. We quickly surmised that we were looking at an historic cadaver pit, a dumping ground for medical waste from the our own Medical college. Our university president arrived on the scene and, in no uncertain terms, ordered us to immediately take on this

project as a salvage excavation.

That was Saturday. On Monday morning we were ordered to complete what we could and get off the site by the end of the day. Back in the lab we set out immediately doing what was needed to clean, stabilize, and inventory the finds. As the numerous skulls were cleaned, it began to appear that all or most of them were from people of African genetic heritage. I submitted my proposal and budget to the university administration to complete the lab work, detailed analysis, conservation measures, etc. I also made tentative arrangements to have Douglas Owsley and his Smithsonian staff analyze the collection, and the medical school's own archivist-historian to contribute to the research. My proposal was rejected. A woefully insufficient sum of money was transferred to our budget to clean up loose ends, but the appropriate project was officially a non-starter. That said, I was able to put some money into funding an undergraduate intern to spend a summer at the Smithsonian working up at least initial osteological analysis.

Almost 20 years later, long after my retirement, I received a call from Shawn Utsey, then serving as chair of VCU's African American Studies Department, asking me to participate in a different film production he was working on. The results of that work was another wonderful documentary feature called *Until the Well Runs Dry: Medicine & the Exploitation of Black Bodies* 2011** I also learned from Dr. Utsey that the new President of university had launched a program of "community conversations" to inform the public about the cadaver pit finds and to determine what should be done with the physical remains of the more than 50 men, women and children we had recovered from that well. I was soon asked to come and speak to, and answer questions in one of these meetings. The "conversations" led to formation of a Family Representative Council, a group of citizens representing the descendants of those whose remains were recovered from the well. The work of this group is still on-going. Richmond Magazine's news editor, Tina Griego, published a sensitive, detailed article on the story of the East Marshall Street well just this past September (**). There is healing in the air in River City these days.

Richmond's most prominent cultural landscape feature is Monument Avenue, a beautiful park-like

boulevard adorned by monumental bronze equestrian statues of Confederate military leaders. The avenue was constructed as part of the so-called Lost Cause revitalization movement a half-century after the Civil War: a forceful effort to throw off the remaining effects of Reconstruction and to forcibly reassert white supremacy. Richmond's monuments are bronze and concrete expressions of the cultural reign of Jim Crow. This past summer RVA hosted the UCI Road World cycling championship races. It was a very big deal for the city and in anticipation of the event there was much public discussion of how we should handle Monument Avenue and other major memorials to the Confederacy found at various spots throughout the city. Was it appropriate for us to display our city's proudly racist heritage. As international cyclists raced through the city, captured by the hi-def cameras of the world's sporting press, a small airplane flew overhead trailing a huge banner. It's message came from the Virginia Flaggers, a group of citizens who wish to honor the Confederate battle flag as a symbol of southern heritage and pride. The airborne banner read "Confederate Heros (sic) Matter."

Does Archaeology Matter in Richmond? Today's session should make it abundantly clear that archaeology has contributed substantially to a vigorous, long-overdue public conversation about the meaning and significance of the city's racially charged past—a past that has been buried physically, culturally, and psychologically, but which influences all of us who live there in the present. I wonder if we can look forward to a future free of the persistent racism which has *apparently* defined us since the city's founding in 1733. I say "apparently," because in my experience, good historic sites archaeology can sometimes disrupt the notion of cultural continuity and essentialism.

From 1988 to 1993 I led a research project on an original city lot in Richmond's port village known as Rocketts. On city lot #203, my colleagues and I uncovered, through a combination of archaeological and archival study, evidence of more than 20 buildings and dozens of other features. We amassed considerably detailed information on over forty households of folks who owned or lived on various subdivisions of Lot 203. Rocketts is especially well documented with visual materials--prints, paintings and photographs--spanning the 19th century, and these visual documents proved especially useful in interpreting Rocketts

culturally as well as physically. This work led to a 3-volume report, an SHA Conference paper (*1993), a number of other papers and presentations, and I am currently working on an interpretive volume for a general audience. I hope to present a public lecture on the findings through the auspices of RVA Archaeology some time in the coming year. I mention the Rocketts project here only because the research shows that Richmond's racial history has not always been a black-and-white issue. In some cases, some places, and some periods, race seems to have hardly been an issue at all (Mouer 1994***). Perhaps if we can see that racism is not necessarily a timeless, changeless essence of our lives, we can learn to live without it.

Am I optimistic that Richmond may finally develop a program to preserve, study and interpret a fuller story of the city's history? When I look to the wonderful work of citizens groups such as RVA Archaeology, a labor of love of the individuals who convened today's session, and Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, very effectively led by Ana Edwards, I feel a genuine promise of good times to come. That said, Richmond is still not Alexandria, or Fairfax County, or New York, or Boston. Richmond is doing much better than it was in the late 20th century, but it is still struggling to meet the needs of crumbling infrastructure, underfunded public education, and overtaxed human services. The city cannot do it alone, even if it decides it wants to. The city's three universities have shown no heart for sponsoring an urban archaeology program. My former employer, VCU, has been a much greater contributor to the problem than to the solution. Can we denizens of the River City evolve a post-racist urban community with the help of archaeology? Maybe, but I don't think I'll see it in my lifetime.